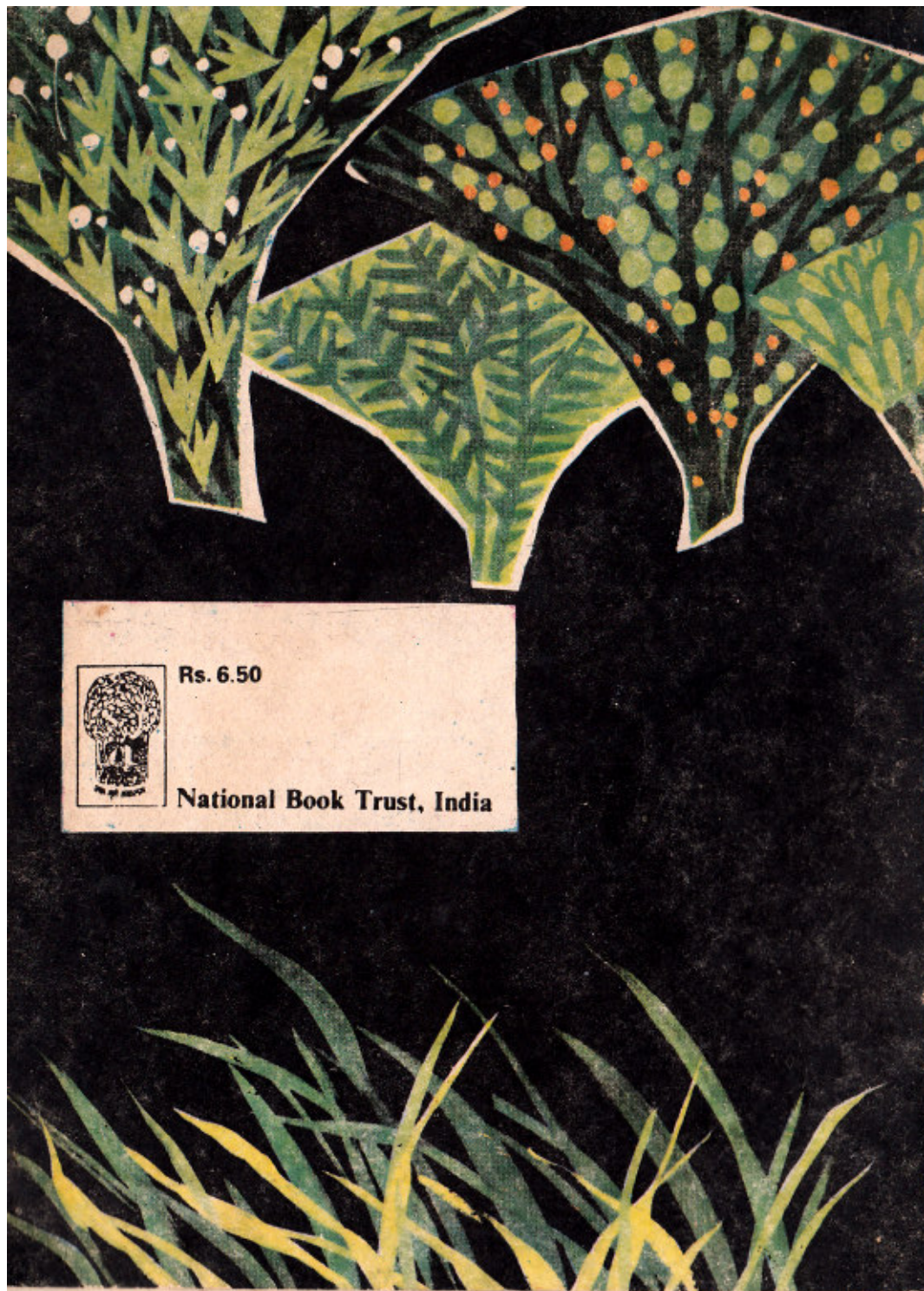




ADVENTURES OF A WILDLIFE WARDEN

E. R. C. DAVIDAR



Rs. 6.50

National Book Trust, India

First Edition 1982
Third Reprint 1992 (*Saka* 1913)
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Rs. 6.50

Published by the Director, National Book Trust, India,
A-5 Green Park, New Delhi-110 016

Nehru Bal Pustakalaya

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E.R.C. DAVIDAR

Illustrator
SHEKHAR



NATIONAL BOOK TRUST, INDIA



ADVENTURE WITH POACHERS

I

Stretched along the foot of a high mountain range is the Kookal Wildlife Sanctuary. A slope of the mountain, some foot-hills and a bit of the plains form the sanctuary. It was well-wooded country and sheltered several kinds of wildlife. Kookal was usually green, dark and cool, except in summer when it became rather warm and dry. As the years went by it became warmer and drier. Once during a long and hot summer, drought set in, not only in Kookal but all over the surrounding region. This had never happened before.

Nelli Odai, the jungle stream which coursed through the sanctuary stopped flowing for the first time in living memory. Water collected in pools and puddles in the stream-bed. Soon these too started drying up one by one, so much so that finally two deep pools were all that were left. The hill tribes living in the sanctuary feasted on fish that were easy to catch in the drying river. But, even as they feasted they were worried. They knew that the following year there would be no fish worth catching.

The jungle stream was not the only source of water. There were also some spring-fed pools scattered about. These also dried up one after the other. Shenbaga Oorani, the largest and deepest of them was the only pool left with water.

The reasons for the drought in Kookal were not far to seek. Tempted by the high price of timber, landowners in the mountain above felled the trees on their land to make quick money. Ruthless and illegal cutting by tree-poachers on Government land also accounted for the loss of many trees. As a result, forests which helped to bring rain to the region were gone.

So it hardly rained.

Roots of plants help to hold the soil on the sides of mountains. With the forests gone, there was nothing left to support the soil and prevent it from slipping down when it rained. To make matters worse, the cultivators, who took over the land after the forests were cleared, paid little attention to conserving the soil. Thus whenever it rained soil from the higher land came down in large quantities and filled the pools in the sanctuary.

Forests also act as sponges. They absorb rain water and release it gradually, giving birth to springs which remain long after the rains have stopped. The loss of forests also affected the springs that fed the stream and the pools in the Kookal jungle.

The denudation of forests and the erosion of soil did not take place in a day, or in a year. It happened over the years. So no one took notice. But the damage had been done. And as a result there was severe drought in the region. What was more alarming was that droughts threatened to become a regular feature.

The wildlife in the sanctuary suffered most. Animals, such as deer, were the worst affected as they were concentrated around the water-holes and tigers, leopards and wild dog packs found it comparatively easy to prey upon them.

Chandran, the Wildlife Warden in charge of the sanctuary, was worried. Protecting the habitat of wildlife, whether animal, bird or plant was his first duty.

He wrote to the Government and to the Minister in charge of forests about the plight of the wildlife in the sanctuary. He urged them to take steps to prevent further felling of forests in the mountain and raise forests on the slopes wherever possible. He warned them that unless measures were taken at once Kookal would cease to be a sanctuary in course of time. The drought made a solution more urgent. On his part he took whatever action he could to make the sanctuary a secure and happy home for wildlife.

II

Summer was always a trying time for Wildlife Warden Chandran. And the drought made things more difficult.

The limited water sources in the sanctuary attracted poachers. Poaching by itself is bad. But to shoot thirsty animals when they come to quench their thirst is not only a crime but cruel too. The

poacher did not care that he used unfair and unsporting methods. All he wanted was his prey; the more animals he shot, the happier he was. He had to be caught and punished and taught a lesson.

The warden took many precautions to prevent poaching. He arrested anyone who was caught killing an animal. Chandran was very brave. He frequently toured the forest, sometimes in his jeep,



and at times on foot. One evening while on jeep patrol, he heard gun shots fired far in the distance. They came from the direction of Shenbaga Oorani, which was off the track and far inside. Chandran was sure a poacher was at work.

The Wildlife Warden strengthened his border patrol, but the poacher escaped. The warden thought that the best plan for catching poachers in future would be to set traps for them at the pools which served as water-holes for wild animals.

The following day he divided some of his guards and watchers into three parties and sent two of them, headed by foresters, to the two river pools. Leading the third party, consisting of wildlife guards Raju, Alagiri, and Chandran's young son Mohan, Chandran set out for Shenbaga Oorani. Mohan was home from school on holiday and begged to be allowed to accompany the party. His father gave in reluctantly.

Half-way to the pool Chandran decided to take a short-cut. The way led through a deep and narrow ravine which was overgrown with bamboo. It was shadowy and they could not see far. It was considered an unsafe place. Elephants usually came there to feed on the bamboo, rest in the shade, and shelter from the heat of the day.

The warden was aware of the danger and told his men to proceed with caution. The wind was in their favour. It was blowing in their faces and not away. This prevented the scent of humans from being carried to the animals. It was primarily the single bull elephants that Chandran was worried about. Elephant herds are usually noisy. But solitary bull elephants are silent and watchful. Some bulls leave their herds when they are driven out by more powerful master bulls. Others become solitary in their old age. There are yet others, mostly young bulls, who leave the herd

temporarily to escape from herd discipline. As a rule most solitary bulls are short tempered and aggressive and dislike people.

Chandran and his party stopped frequently, listened and then proceeded. Young Mohan came last in case they had to make a quick get-away. There was silence in the ravine except for the occasional bird song, murmur of bamboos and chirping of crickets. The party came to a sharp bend in the trail. Suddenly right in the middle, standing across the path, was the dreaded cross tusker! The cross tusker is so called because its tusks, instead of running parallel



to each other, overlap across the trunk. It looked dangerous—and fierce. As the men turned and started to run, the elephant saw them. Trumpeting loudly, it charged. It was frightening. When the tusker was almost on top of Raju, who was short and stout and could not run as fast as the others, his bright green turban, which was part of his uniform, fell. As it fell, it opened to its full length and lay along the path. To the charging elephant it seemed as if Raju himself had tripped and fallen and lay stretched out. It stopped to trample the cloth, screaming with rage as it did so. By the time it realised its mistake Chandran and his party had got away.

III

It was a narrow escape and a lucky one. After making sure that the cross tusker was not following them they halted to rest. It was an unnerving experience even for an experienced forest officer like



Chandran. He was worried about his young son. But Mohan was not scared. On the contrary, he was thrilled and excited by the adventure.

"Do you want to go home?" Chandran asked. But the boy was determined to go on.

The Wildlife Warden had planned to be at Shenbaga Oorani very early in the afternoon hoping to catch the poachers when they got there. But the chance encounter with the elephant had delayed them. So Chandran changed his plan. Instead of setting a trap for the poachers he decided on a plan of attack. When they came near the pool he whispered to his men to get under cover and keep quiet. Then he moved forward carefully, on all fours, through the undergrowth. Fallen dry leaves were everywhere and he had to take care not to step on them, as that would have given him away. When he reached a spot from which he could see the pool, he took out his binoculars and scanned the surrounding forest. There were several trees around the pool but some were bare, some had fresh young leaves sprouting and there were others which were not large enough to hold a *machan* or tree platform. But there was one mango tree which was so huge and dense that it was capable of hiding a large number of people among its branches. Chandran concentrated on this tree. It was with difficulty that he could make out a *machan* right in the middle of it, where the tree was thickest. It was about six metres from the ground. The *machan* was covered with leaves in order to make it look like a part of the tree. On peering closely, the Wildlife Warden saw some peep-holes among its branches. Sticking out of two of these were the barrels of two guns. The poachers were well hidden, but their guns had given them away.

Chandran crawled back to his men and revealed to them his plan of action. But Alagiri protested, "It would be too dangerous

for you to approach them alone, Sir."

Raju joined him. "We shall rush at them together," he suggested.





But Chandran thought that his plan was the best. Asking his men to obey his instructions, he marched forward boldly all alone. Mohan hid behind a tree and watched Chandran go. Although frightened for his safety he was proud of his courage.

As the Wildlife Warden neared the *machan* he noticed that the guns had been withdrawn. He stopped under the mango tree and ordered the poachers to come down. "I know you're there," he called. But they did not move. He repeated his order.

One of the poachers replied cheekily, "You come and get us, if you can," and pointed his gun at Chandran.

This angered the warden. He shouted back that he was not alone and that the poachers were surrounded by his men. The shout was also a signal for the guards. They blew their whistles, moved to different positions, and blew their whistles again, making it appear that there were many men around the pool. Mohan tried to help by stamping on the leaves and blowing on his father's whistle from his hiding place. A herd of sambur lying in a thicket near the pool was disturbed and in the confusion ran around the pool in circles, adding to the noise.

The poachers were shrewd, cunning men. They reasoned among themselves, "If there are really so many men in the forest why are they not showing themselves?"

Chandran guessed their thoughts and fearing that they might call his bluff, shouted to his men, "Keep under cover until these fellows come down. I don't want anyone hurt."

This made the poachers believe that they were really surrounded by a large number of the warden's staff. Finally, Chandran warned them, "If you don't come down straight away I am coming up to kick you out," and began climbing the ladder.

The poachers lost nerve and hesitated no more. When they

came down the tree, the Wildlife Warden took their weapons away. Then the two guards and Mohan walked out of the forest to join them. They were relieved that their bluff had worked. Seeing the



two guards and one small boy, the poachers were ashamed. Suddenly one of them had an idea. If he could capture Mohan then they could hold him hostage and might still be able to get away. When Mohan reached the group one of the poachers took out his hunting knife and jumped to grab him. But Mohan's father was quicker. Even as the poacher laid hands on the boy, Chandran stepped between them and with one mighty blow knocked the fellow down. Whatever little fight was left in the poachers was soon gone. The guards promptly handcuffed them to prevent any further mischief. Then the poachers were marched off to the police station.



HUNTING THE CROSS TUSKER

I

Wildlife Warden Chandran was working in his office one morning when a man rushed up to his table panting heavily and collapsed. He was covered with blood and his clothes were in tatters. The warden at once went to his side and examined his wounds. They were not deep and only his skin was cut in many



places. But the man was badly shaken; otherwise there was nothing seriously wrong with him. When his wounds were being attended to he came round. After he had recovered the warden questioned him.

The man's story was that he and his companion had, as usual, gone to the Kookal forest that morning to gather dead wood. When they neared Nelli Odai, the jungle stream, where the cover was thick, an elephant charged at them. They both ran. He was closer to the elephant than his companion. The elephant was almost on top of him when he stumbled and fell. He thought his end had come. But as luck would have it he fell into a hidden pit. The elephant ran on without stopping, caught up with his companion and trampled the poor man to death. He was shocked and frightened but got up and ran blindly through the forest unaware of the thorns that tore his clothes and skin until he got to the warden's office. He identified the killer as a cross tusker.

The Wildlife Warden and his men accompanied the wood-gatherer to the place of the killing. The cross tusker had not left the spot. They had to chase it away before they could recover the body of the wood-collector.

The warden had to submit a report of the killing to the Chief Wildlife Warden. For this purpose he had to satisfy himself about the identity of the killer. The footprints of the elephant found near the body matched those of the cross tusker. To simplify matters the tusker was also in the area. So Warden Chandran had no difficulty in accepting the wood-gatherer's statement that the cross tusker was the killer. The report was written and dispatched.

The Chief Wildlife Warden had been receiving reports of the wicked behaviour of the cross tusker for some time. But he did not take any action thinking that the tusker was suffering from some temporary ailment and that its behaviour was a passing phase.



When the Wildlife Warden's report of the tusker's latest killing reached him he felt that he had given the elephant enough time to mend its ways and that it did not deserve any further sympathy. So, without hesitation, he applied to the State Government for approval to order the cross tusker shot. This was necessary under the Wildlife Protection Act, under which wild elephants enjoy full protection and cannot be harmed in any manner. As an additional safeguard in the case of animals in sanctuaries State Government approval was also needed.

After sending his report Warden Chandran pondered over the situation. The cross tusker was not new to the sanctuary and raided the cultivated fields bordering it from time to time. When there were no crops, or when the villagers disturbed and harassed it, the tusker moved inside the sanctuary. There it behaved quite normally and reacted only when people came too close or annoyed it in any way. This was understandable as villagers often threw stones, sticks, fire-crackers and fire-brands at it and, occasionally, even fired at it with old muzzle guns when it raided their fields. But it never hurt anyone. It was only on its recent visit that it had taken to chasing people. It had killed three people altogether, two outside the sanctuary shortly before moving into the sanctuary, and then the wood-gatherer in the sanctuary itself.

"Sir, I think the cross tusker's behaviour is due to the queer formation of his tusks," Mohideen the Wildlife Forester suggested.

"Why do you say that?" asked Chandran.

"Because he is not able to use his trunk as freely as other elephants, he is irritated and angry and wants to take it out on people," Mohideen replied.

"If that was the case he should have started killing long ago, why now?" Chandran dismissed Mohideen's suggestion but doubts

remained and he kept worrying.

One of the causes for a bull elephant's bad behaviour was sometimes said to be his being in a state of *musth*. The bull elephant is said to be in a state of *musth* during the mating season. A *musth* elephant is often irritable and is easily provoked. This condition,



however, is easily noticed as the *musth* glands placed between the eye and the ear on either side of an elephant's head burst open and an oily secretion flows, staining the elephant's cheeks. None of the wildlife staff had taken a close look at the cross tusker to see whether it was in a state of *musth* or not after it had begun its bout of killing.

Elephants suffering from a wound or illness also behave badly. These are temporary disabilities. Perhaps the cross tusker had turned killer due to one of these reasons.

Whether the cross tusker's disability was temporary or permanent, time alone would tell. Chandran loved all animals and was very concerned about them. He was worried about the cross tusker and felt strongly that in all fairness to the animal it should be given time and watched.

So he wrote to the Chief Wildlife Warden making out a case for giving the cross tusker one more chance and pleading for a week's time before giving orders for its destruction. Meanwhile the Government order approving the proposal to have the cross tusker destroyed had come. The Chief Wildlife Warden was impressed by the earnestness of Chandran's plea and decided to grant his request. He agreed to postpone the order by a week on the condition that the time limit was not extended further.

Having got a week's grace for the cross tusker, the Wildlife Warden wished he had asked for more time. He wondered if a week would be enough. But then, if he had more time and the tusker went on a rampage he would have been held responsible. That was why he had decided not to ask for more than a week. As time was short, the warden had to act fast.

Chandran had to first study the killer before making any further plans. The day he got the Chief Wildlife Warden's letter he

sent his men to track the elephant, beginning from where they had seen it last. Locating the cross tusker did not present any problem as the animal had not left the sanctuary. The trackers returned in the evening and told him where to find the killer.

II

The next morning, accompanied by his son Mohan and guard Alagiri, Chandran set off. He wanted to study the cross tusker. Besides his binoculars, Chandran took his heavy rifle, just in case the tusker turned violent. His plan was to observe the elephant from a safe place. Ordinarily, he would not have taken Mohan with him. But during this trip he was confident that with his knowledge of the Kookal jungle and his experience he would be able to avoid an unexpected meeting with the killer elephant.

The warden's party was able to locate the cross tusker from a long way off. It was feeding on a hill-side. They had a clear but distant view of the animal, and observed it through the binoculars.

They saw that the elephant could not use its trunk freely. Branches of trees and bamboo stems which were within reach of much smaller elephants were beyond its grasp. Even to get at branches of small trees it had to lift its head high and strain its neck. Sometimes, with great difficulty the elephant would pull its trunk out from between its tusks hoping that this would help. But then, it found that its tusks came in the way of its mouth. The cross tusker also could not use its tusks for jobs that ordinarily tuskers used them for, such as peeling bark off trees. It was very frustrating for the animal. Perhaps this was why the tusker preferred raiding field



crops which were easy to gather and eat, the warden thought.

The peculiar formation of the cross tusker's tusks was indeed a handicap. But could this alone account for its aggressive behaviour? The warden decided to take a closer look.

It was getting warm and the elephant would soon stop eating and would want a drink. Nelli Odai was not far away and the warden guessed that the tusker would be making its way to the nearest pool in the dry stream-bed. This would give him an opportunity to have a close look. He consulted the guard and they both agreed on the route the elephant was likely to take.

With the warden leading, the three of them cut across the jungle, swiftly and silently. In a short while they reached the spot they were making for. There they found a tall rock, the top of which was beyond the reach of an elephant. Three sides of the rock fell away sharply and one side sloped steeply to the ground. They climbed the rock with difficulty using the cracks in it on the sloping side as footholds. Some bushes growing in a depression on the top provided the necessary cover. There they sat and waited.

They did not have to wait long before they heard an animal coming along the game trail which passed close to the rock. Soon it came into view. It was the cross tusker all right! It was making its way slowly, with a very slight limp and seemed to be in pain. They could see that it was not in *musth*. As the tusker walked past, it caught the scent of people on the rock. They were so close to the elephant that their scent reached the tusker powerfully. Its reaction was immediate. It swung round and charged. Finding that the people were beyond its reach, it placed one leg on the rock, leaned forward and tried to reach them with its outstretched trunk. Chandran and his companions had some anxious moments. Would he succeed? they wondered. But the tusker failed. This made the



elephant more angry. It went round and round the rock screaming with rage and tearing up the bushes in its path.

Any other boy in Mohan's place would have fallen down with fright. But Mohan was calm. He kept watching the raging elephant. He saw something which the others had not noticed. On its neck, partly hidden by one ear was a large lump. He drew his father's attention to it. The warden at once recognised what it was—a closed wound laden with pus. His question had been answered. He was no longer in doubt. The reason for the aggressive behaviour of the cross tusker was this painful wound; it was not the shape of its tusks that made it a killer. The wound had also slowed down the bull elephant as to enable many of its possible victims to get away. Otherwise there would have been more loss of life.

The cross tusker could not lay siege to the rock for long. The sun beat down mercilessly and the elephant was beginning to tire. The tusker's thirst finally won and it moved away.

III

As soon as the Wildlife Warden returned from the jungle he sent an express telegram to his friend Dr Ramesh, the veterinary officer attached to the wildlife department, to come at once. Dr Ramesh arrived the next evening and went straight to Warden Chandran's house, with whom he usually stayed. Over tea, Chandran told Dr Ramesh all about the cross tusker. Then he laid his plans before the doctor.

"You know the tranquiliser gun supplied to me. I plan to shoot the cross tusker down with it if you will agree to operate

on his wound as he lies stunned." He added, "I have a feeling that once his wound is treated and he is relieved of pain and suffering there is a chance of his becoming all right."

The doctor was taken aback. It was a strange request. He had never operated on a wild elephant and the cross tusker was a killer. But he recovered quickly. He thought over the matter carefully. There was, of course, the element of danger. But there was also excitement of a new kind of hunt. The veterinary doctor's patients were mostly elephants used by the forest department. He loved them. How was the cross tusker different from them? he thought. Here was an opportunity to save an elephant's life. He also knew that Chandran would not expose him to danger. He took his decision. Shaking the warden's hand he grinned and said, "Very well, I will do it."

Mohan, who was listening to the conversation, was struck by a doubt, "Father, supposing the cross tusker falls on the side on which his wound is."

"I never thought of that," his father admitted. "Once he falls we won't be able to turn him over. I wish we had some tame elephant," he muttered.

"I think it should be possible to reach the wound from either side. In any case I suppose it is a risk we must take," the doctor said thoughtfully.

The warden brought out his tranquiliser gun which he called the 'stun gun' for it stunned its victims temporarily. It was also called the 'capture gun' as it was mostly used for capturing animals. Chandran had used it before on spotted deer. That was when he was ordered to capture the deer which lived in large numbers in the sanctuary and had to be transported to a forest which had too few. He had also experimented with it on domestic animals. The gun

fired darts loaded with a compound of liquid tranquiliser drugs. On hitting the quarry the dart injected the drug it contained and put the quarry to sleep for a while.

It was important that the right dose of the drug was packed into each dart for the particular animal one was after. Too strong a dose could kill the animal and a weak one would have no effect. Dr Ramesh was quite knowledgeable where chemicals were concerned. He and Chandran studied manuals on drugs and with the experience gained from experiments on other animals worked out the right mixture and dosage. For an animal the size of the cross tusker the dose had to be strong and highly concentrated. After dinner they loaded half a dozen darts, cleaned the gun and checked its mechanism. And then they were ready for the hunt.

IV

The next morning, four days after the receipt of the Chief Wildlife Warden's letter, the Wildlife Warden and the veterinary doctor accompanied by two men set out on the hunt. One of the men, a wildlife guard, carried the doctor's medical bag, and the other, also a guard was an expert tracker belonging to one of the hill tribes residing in the sanctuary. The party tracked the tusker from morning till late afternoon. At last they saw it. The elephant was feeding in a valley covered with thick jungle.

Warden Chandran knew the limitations of his stun gun. Unlike a rifle its range was very limited. For an effective shot he had to get to within twenty-five metres of his quarry. Again, unlike a bullet, the tranquiliser drug took time to act. Therefore, the time



and the place of the hunt had to be chosen with care. The valley in which the tusker was feeding was not the best place to come to terms with it and the wind was fickle. The hunters waited patiently for the tusker to break cover. But it was in no hurry to do so as it had drunk water only a few hours earlier. Meanwhile, the day was fast advancing. The hunters decided to abandon the hunt for the day.

The following day the hunters changed their tactics. They sat on the rock where the Wildlife Warden had his first adventure with the cross tusker and waited in the hope that the animal would pass that way. But the elephant went to the other pool in Nelli Odai instead.

Five days of the week's grace allowed to the cross tusker had elapsed, and Chandran was worried. There was nothing he could do but wait. Any desperate or hasty action could prove foolish. Dr Ramesh read his thoughts and restrained him from doing anything rash.

The cross tusker continued to remain in the Nelli Odai area and it was anybody's guess which of the two remaining pools it would visit. To make sure that it would go to the lower pool where he would lie in wait, Chandran posted some of his men on trees at the upper pool with instructions to chase the elephant away from there by making a lot of noise, should it approach. He gave them tins, and drums and fire-crackers. When the cross tusker came near the pool, the men on the trees tried to scare it away. This only angered the elephant. It tried to push the trees down. As it got closer to the pool, the din increased so much that even the cross tusker found it impossible to bear. After one final furious trumpet it retreated.

When it was chased away from the Nelli Odai²¹ upper pool, the

cross tusker was angry as well as thirsty. The hunters waiting in ambush at the lower pool could hear it coming from a long way off. But as ill-luck would have it, it went straight to the pool along the bank opposite the one where the hunters were waiting. The outer



edge of the pool where the elephant stood, was more than forty metres from the tree on which the hunters lay hidden. Had the elephant approached the pool along their bank the Wildlife Warden could have got his shot. It was the hunters' turn to feel frustrated. They waited anxiously, hoping that the tusker would come nearer them at least on its way out.

After quenching its thirst the tusker was in a hurry to eat, for its meal had been delayed. As the hunters had hoped, it walked towards their tree. The Wildlife Warden took aim and fired as soon as it came within range. The dart hit a rib and fell. The report, unlike a rifle shot, was muffled and low. The elephant mistaking the direction of the report charged forward. Before the tusker could get out of range, Chandran quickly reloaded and fired. But the dart hit the bull at an angle and the hunters could see that it had not penetrated the elephant's body and hardly any drug had been injected. The cross tusker walked away in a rage. The hunters had not got a proper shot. Disappointed, they returned home. It was the sixth day.

When Mohan welcomed the hunters home he knew without being told that they had failed. They were cheerless and glum. At dinner that night Mohan could feel the tension in the air. There was very little talk. He knew that his father was making up his mind whether to give up or continue the hunt. Soon, however, the silence was broken and the tension eased. Chandran laughed and joked as usual. Dr Ramesh knew at once that his friend had come to a decision; he was not only going after the killer but was determined to get him. He was right. Chandran had been giving the matter serious thought and weighing his chances. He came to the conclusion that unless he took the risk of tracking the cross tusker on foot—a dangerous thing to do even when armed with a

powerful rifle—the hunt was doomed to fail. And this would mean the killing of the cross tusker at the end of the week.

V

As soon as there was enough light to see clearly, the hunters set forth the following morning, the last day of the hunt. The Wildlife Warden picked up the trail left the previous evening and began tracking the elephant, step by step, by its footprints. As he did not want his friend Ramesh and the forest guard hurt, he told them to follow at a safe distance.

The trail was plain and easy to follow. But the Wildlife Warden had to exercise great care. He had not only to concentrate on tracking but also to look about him every now and then as there was no knowing where the killer would be lying in wait. And progress was therefore slow.

The cross tusker had walked a long way, stopping to feed only once on the way. When the Wildlife Warden finally caught up with it, it was past noon. The animal was in a clearing which was covered with knee-high grass which was partly dry. The elephant was feeding on the grass. The Wildlife Warden tested the wind, as he had been testing it right from the start of the hunt to make sure that it was not carrying his scent to the tusker. This he did by crushing a handful of dead leaves and throwing them up in the air and watching the direction of their fall. Satisfied that the killer was not aware of his presence, he sat behind a tree at the edge of the meadow and waited for the animal to move out to a favourable position.

But the elephant showed no signs of moving. The shadows

were beginning to lengthen. It would be too late if he were to wait any longer. And the seven days' grace would be over. It was the warden's last chance and he decided to take it.

He got up and checked his stun gun. His only hope lay in concealment. As the gun did not make much noise, he hoped that he could lie hidden after firing the shot, until the drug took effect. Chandran stalked his quarry as silently as a tiger would a deer, taking as much advantage as possible of the meagre cover—a bush here and a depression there. The closer he got to the killer the riskier it became. He could hear his heart go thump, thump, and wondered if he would be able to hold his gun steady. When he got within shooting range, he hid behind a slender tree, rested his gun on it, took aim and fired.

The cross tusker was facing the other way. It flinched visibly as the shot hit a fleshy spot behind its shoulder. It turned and looked around to find out what had hit it.

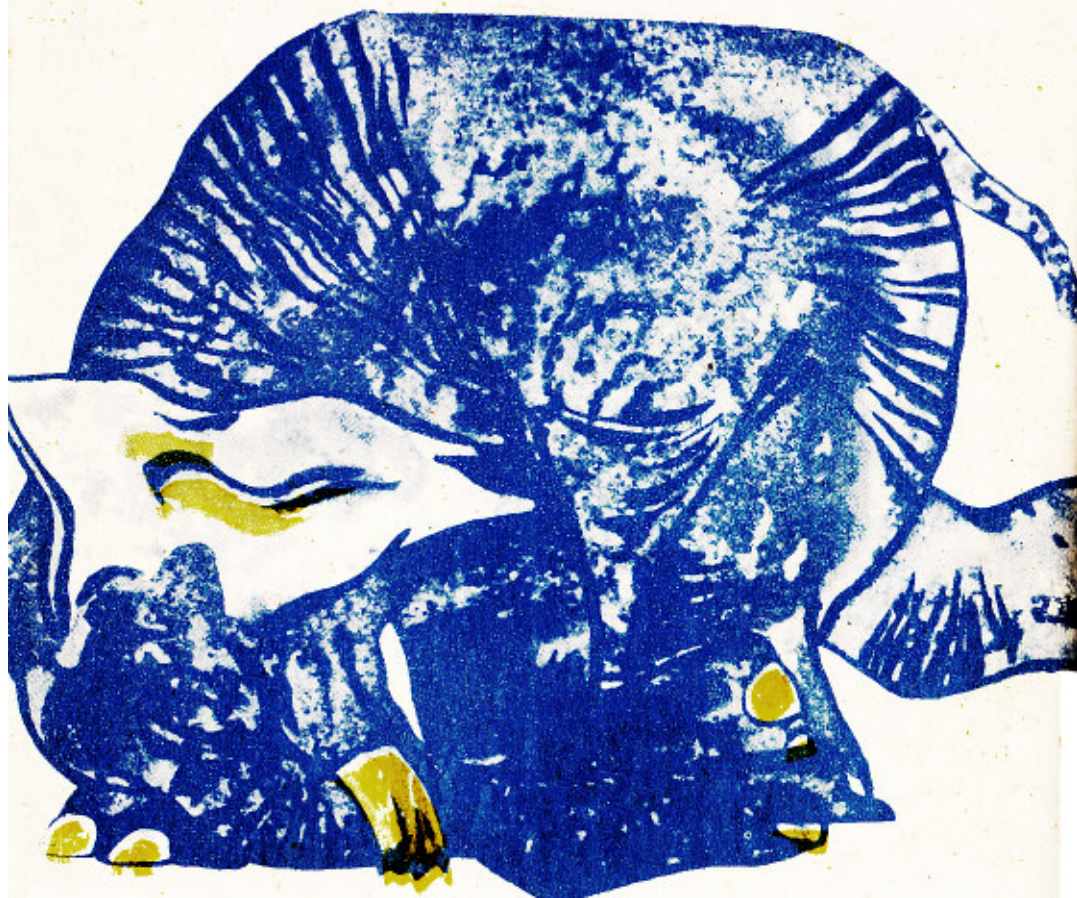
Just then, the wind changed and the tusker caught the Wildlife Warden's scent. Its killer instinct was aroused at once. Chandran realising that the game was up and that his only chance now lay in running away decided to take a head start.

The Wildlife Warden sprang up and ran away from the tusker as fast as his legs would carry him. The killer saw the hunter and gave chase. It was a deadly, silent and determined killer that pursued Chandran. Even in a clearing in the jungle there are many obstacles for a man. But few things stop an elephant. It can bulldoze its way through the densest thicket. As the warden ran avoiding obstacles, the elephant gained on him. The warden found his gun an unnecessary weight and threw it away and this helped him to gain some speed. But he had to be careful all the same. One wrong step, one stumble, could cost him his life.



It was a close race! The elephant thundered after him. Fortunately for the Wildlife Warden, they came to a forest track and he was able to keep ahead of the elephant. But for how long, he wondered! The killer, in spite of its wound, kept up its pace, but the hunter was fast tiring.

The tusker moved closer, and raised its trunk to strike the warden down. Suddenly, because of the elephant's exertions, the



drug had a dramatic effect. The trunk came down gently, as in a slow motion film. Its legs tottered, it stumbled and fell.

VI

Hearing the elephant's fall the Wildlife Warden stopped. When the tusker did not get up, he blew his whistle. Dr Ramesh and the guard heard it and came running. The elephant lay stretched out. It was a frightening sight. They watched it, listening to its deep, heavy breathing—a sign that the elephant was under the influence of the tranquiliser. The hunters approached it cautiously.

The doctor carried out some tests to make sure that the elephant's sleep was deep enough to allow him to perform an operation. Fortunately for the hunters, the elephant had fallen in such a way that its wound was exposed. It was a deep wound. When Dr Ramesh opened it, blood and pus burst out and spattered his clothes. "The poor fellow must have been in agony," the doctor said.

"No wonder he turned killer," muttered the warden.

The doctor probed deep into the wound and dug out three pieces of lead, obviously fired from some ancient muzzle-loading gun, and gave them to the warden. "It is the work of some cultivator whose crop the tusker had become too fond of," Chandran said in a low, angry voice.

Dr Ramesh cleaned the wound, poured in a good quantity of antibiotics that would help it heal quickly, dressed it and stitched it up. As the elephant showed no signs of waking up, Ramesh gave it an antidote for the tranquiliser. The hunters then retreated to a safe

distance and watched.

After some time the fallen tusker stirred. Then, very, very slowly it stood up. When it turned towards them they noticed that its right tusk had broken off in the heavy fall at the point



where it crossed the other. The bull elephant was no longer the cross tusker in more sense than one! The pain the elephant once suffered from had vanished and it was free to swing its trunk in any direction it pleased. It was as if an oppressive load had been lifted. It did not need to depend too much on man-grown crops any more.

The tusker saw the two men, but made no attempt to attack. When it lifted its trunk high in the air and waved it, the men wondered if the elephant was trying to say "Thank you"!

NIGHT WATCH

I

“FATHER, my holidays will be over soon and I would like to spend a night at Shenbaga Oorani watching the animals,” Mohan said to his father one morning.

“Why not, son,” his father agreed. “And it is the right time too. The nights are clear and moonlit these days,” he added. Mohan was thrilled. “Actually, I have been thinking about it myself,” his father continued. “I can keep an eye on poachers and also check on the wildlife in the area. Particularly how the big ones are getting on in the drought.”

After an early lunch they set off. On the way they met the cross tusker. It continued to be called the cross tusker by the sanctuary staff through force of habit, although it was no longer one. The tusker was feeding peacefully by the side of the track. It let them pass without bothering about them. The warden observed that its wound was healing well.

It was late afternoon when they reached Shenbaga Oorani. The *machan* put up by the poachers on the mango tree beside the pool was still there. But it had not been used for some time; it was bare in places and needed some fresh green leaves to cover it. Asking Mohan to collect some small branches, the Wildlife Warden went round the pool examining the tracks of the animals that had visited it. He was pleased with what he saw; there had been many visitors.

A ladder made from a single bamboo by trimming its side shoots, which served as steps, led up to the *machan*. Mohan had never been up one of these. He had to climb it like a monkey. It was amusing at the start, but as he climbed higher the ladder began to sway from side to side, making climbing difficult. With a sigh of relief he stepped onto the *machan*.

The *machan* was made of a few lengths of bamboo thrown across two branches of the mango tree and tied down with vines collected from the forest. More bamboos were tied round the platform enclosing it. Branches and creepers were hung from the sides to hide the *machan* so that animals visiting the pool did not catch sight of its occupants. Peep-holes were provided for seeing without being seen; there was enough space for about four people to sit and for two to lie down. The *machan* had a fine view of the pool and its immediate surroundings.

The pool, which was irregular in shape, was only half-full. The edge nearest the mango tree was rocky and the water of the pool was clear, but the opposite side was muddy and the pool was shallow. Two well-trodden game-trails led to the far end of the pool. The pool and its surroundings were cool and green against the dry, dusty forest beyond—like an oasis in a desert.

It was a still afternoon and Mohan found it hot and stuffy on



the *machan*. Mohan's father picked up a dry leaf from the floor of the *machan* and dropped it over the side. It went straight down like a stone. He smiled. Then by using sign language so as not to disturb the silence of the forest, he conveyed to Mohan that there was no breeze to carry their scent to animals approaching the pool. Wild animals, particularly herbivores, have a highly developed sense of smell and under favourable conditions can detect human presence from a long way off. With the absence of a scent-carrying wind their chances of seeing wild animals brightened.

II

Small birds were the first to arrive at the pool. Parties of bulbuls and jungle mynas came to quench their thirst. After drinking the water they jumped into the pool in the shallows among the rocks and bathed—chirping loudly. Mohan was reminded of his classmates on a picnic and he watched them with amusement. While they were enjoying their bath Mohan noticed a sparrow hawk approach stealthily and sit in the shadow of a tall tree, unobserved. Mohan guessed its intentions and was tempted to shout a warning to the birds. Reading his thoughts, Mohan's father shook his head. After all, the hawk also had to live and small birds were its prey, thought Mohan, like an understanding naturalist.



Besides, he would have disturbed the peace in the sanctuary. As they watched, the hawk suddenly dived, whizzed through the air like a bullet, caught a bulbul in its claws and returned to its perch with its kill. The bulbul's bathing companions dispersed, screaming in terror.

As peace returned, a troop of langur monkeys came swinging through the trees, with ease and grace. When they reached the pool, they did not come down straightaway, but jumped from branch to branch and from tree to tree, keeping a sharp watch to see if any of their enemies were about. Satisfied that all was well, they came down one by one to drink water from the pool, and went to the side with rocks. The young ones, clinging to their mothers' bellies, then jumped down and played. They were full of mischief and were fun to watch.



While watching the langurs, Mohan's attention was attracted to a bird that flew down to sit on a low branch of the mango tree. The bird's beauty took Mohan's breath away. He looked at it more closely with his father's binoculars and marvelled. The bird was the size of a bulbul but pure white in colour with a black head and crest. The most attractive part of the bird was its tail—two long, white feathers trailing behind it like two ribbons. It was a male paradise flycatcher. Mohan wondered how the bird was going to drink without getting its pretty tail soaking wet. The bird flew over the pool, dived swiftly down and as it reached the surface of the pool opened its mouth, and swallowed a mouthful; then it



straightened itself and flew up. This performance it repeated twice. The golden evening light and the woodland setting were like a beautiful frame for the bird's performance.

The next visitors to the pool were spotted deer, commonly known in India as the Cheetal. They advanced hesitantly. Mohan expected a large stag to lead the way. But the first to break cover was an old doe. It was a bundle of nerves as it moved into the open. At the slightest noise it would stamp its forefeet and turn to bolt. Slowly, step by step, it reached the water's edge, where it stood staring at the water for a while. Then it lowered its head to drink. But even as it did so it appeared uncertain. Suddenly, it jerked its

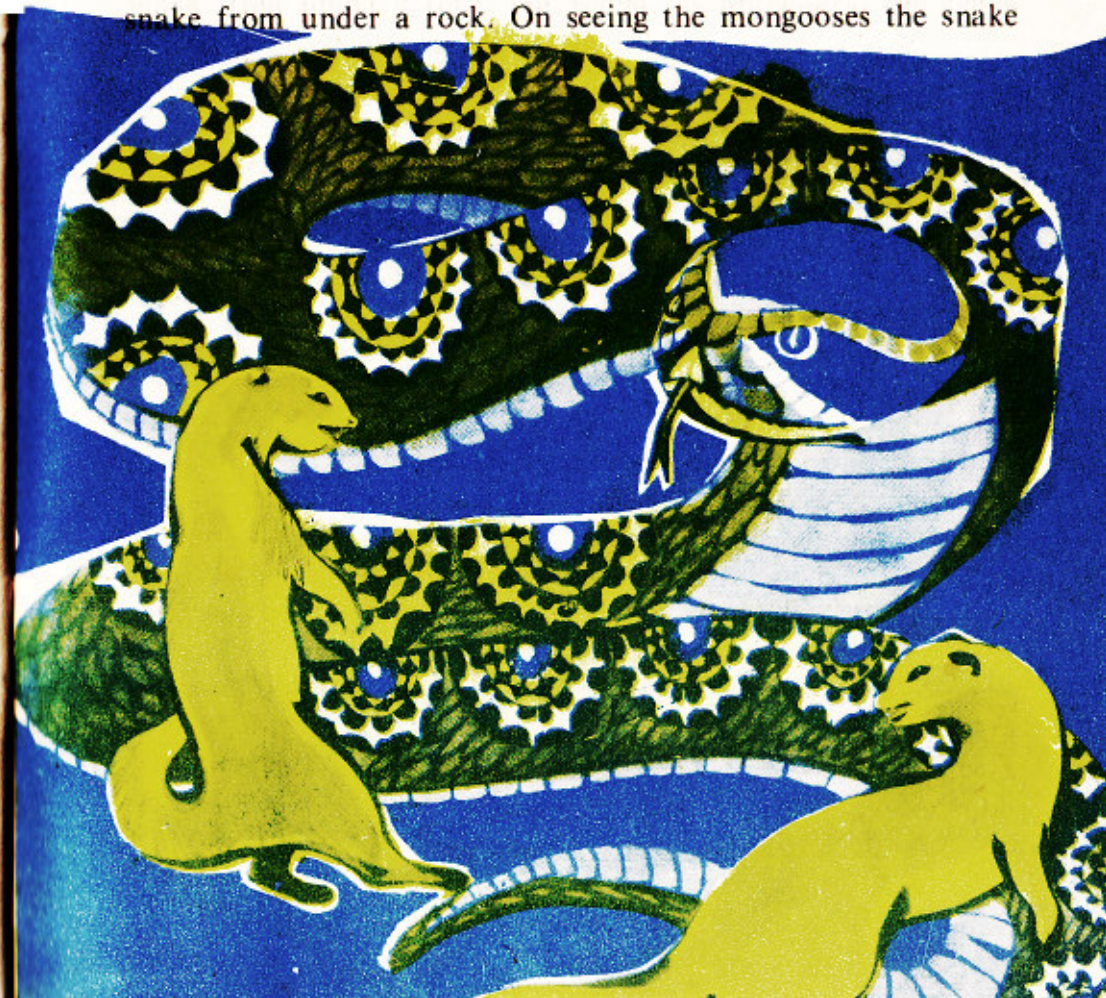


head up for one last look round to check that no enemies were nearby. Finally, it put its head down for a long drink. This acted as a signal to the waiting herd, who rushed in a body to drink the water. Mohan was shocked to see the big stags at the rear, pushing their way through the herd to occupy the best places. The deer remained near the pool for a long time. While the fawns played, two of the biggest stags fought. They lowered their heads and charged at each other, head on, their antlers meeting with a loud clash. Thereafter the fight became more of a pushing match. This was repeated several times until the weaker of the stags turned and walked away swiftly. Mohan expected the winner to follow the loser and drive its antlers into the loser's side and finish it off. But it did not do so. It was the kind of fight that often takes place among stags during the breeding season, to establish who is going to be master of the herd. The master stag generally does not bother about the other stags, unless its position is challenged or in any way interfered with. Then there would be another fight. But the leadership of the herd is a more permanent arrangement. Usually it is an old doe who is the leader—such as the one that led the way to the water in this particular herd.

The jungle was full of sounds, some sweet and some harsh; some low and some loud; some short and some long. Some of these Mohan easily recognised, while others he could not. As the evening advanced some birds became very noisy; the noisiest among them were the jungle cocks, parakeets, and small green barbets. Suddenly there came a piercing scream, as if someone was being attacked and strangled. Mohan expected his father to rush to the rescue of the victim of the attack. Just then a family of peafowl flew up and landed on a tree nearby with loud shrill cries before settling down for the night. It was the peafowls who made all kinds of

peculiar noises, and were responsible for the screams heard earlier. Mohan would have laughed at their performance had he not been so anxious not to break the silence.

The last visitors to the pool before night fell were a pair of brown mongooses. They were larger than the more common grey mongooses that snake-charmers keep. They searched among stones and leaves for food. In doing so they disturbed an angry snake from under a rock. On seeing the mongooses the snake



realised its mistake and tried to get away. But the expert snake-catchers soon overtook it. They dragged it away into the undergrowth where Mohan could not see it.

III

Darkness descended on the forest. In the brief interval between the time the birds and animals of the day retired and the time the nocturnal birds and animals took over, there was a moment of deep silence. A night jar with its "chuck, chuck, chuck, chuck-r-r-r" was the first to break the silence. A great horned owl followed with its loud, eerie "bu-boo" "bu-boo" repeated at intervals. Mohan was reminded of stories heard about people lost in forests being driven to madness by this strange cry, and shivered.

Sitting in the semi-darkness, Mohan found that his binoculars gave him a slightly better view than his naked eyes. But even then he had to rely more on his ears than his eyes. He wished the moon would rise and light up the pool and its surroundings.

The long watch was beginning to tire Mohan. He found the bamboo seat hard and uneven and would have liked to have shifted his position. He wanted to have a swipe at the mosquitoes and insects that were biting and annoying him. He wanted to stretch his legs, which were beginning to feel stiff. He wished he could clear his throat, sneeze, and above all, talk and ask his father a hundred questions. But he dared not do any of these things for fear of frightening the animals away. He looked with admiration and envy at his father, who sat still like a statue. He had heard him talk of people who could spend hours on end on a *machan* without stirring.

even if nothing came to relieve the monotony. Mohan considered himself lucky to witness some exciting jungle dramas which few are privileged to see, and yet he was restless. He wished he could sit still like his father, without discomfort.

On looking at his father closely, he found him relaxed. Mohan decided to follow his example and relax, so that he too could enjoy the night-watch.

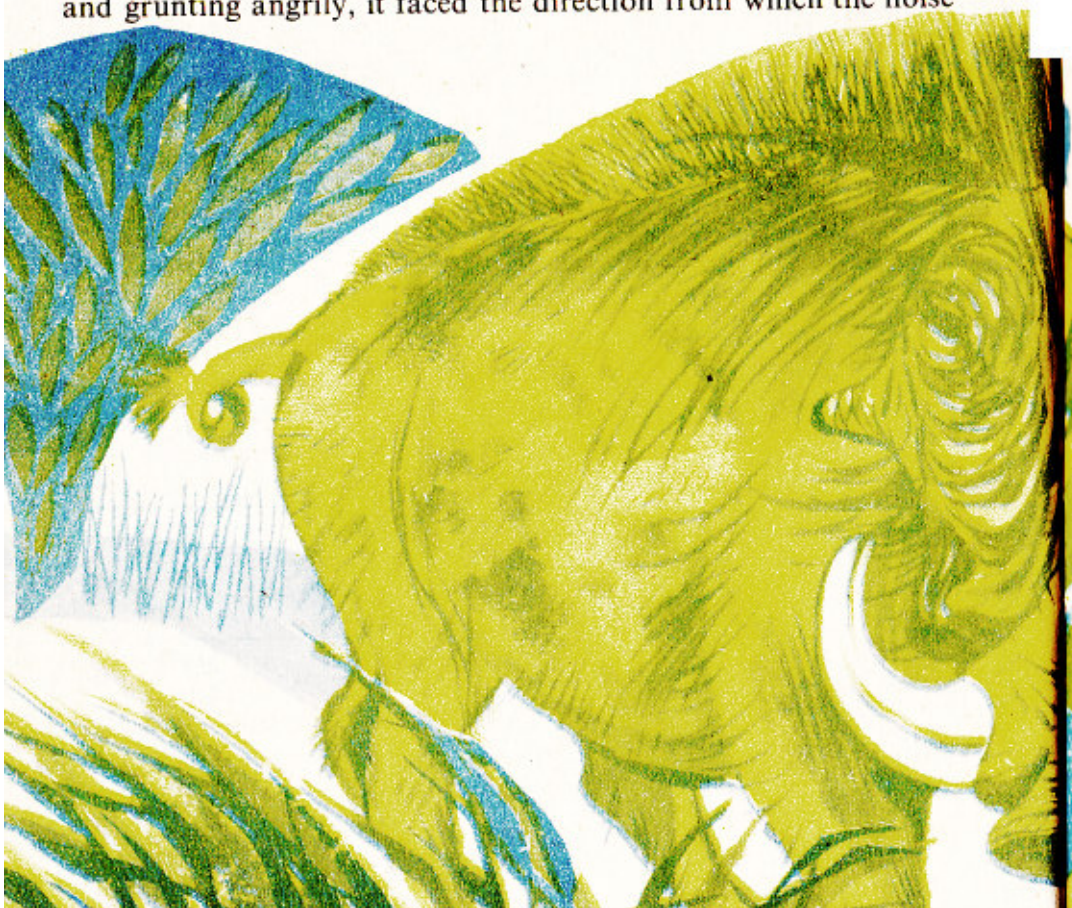
The moon which was three-quarters full was late in rising but when it did rise between two hills it was a beautiful sight. The moon could be seen journeying across the star-filled night sky. On the pool's surface the moon looked like a shiny silver barge making its way across the waters at a leisurely pace. This picture would break up into a thousand pieces whenever a fish or a frog jumped, and reassemble again when the water was still.

In the moonlight, trees and stones cast a pattern of dark and light patches on the forest floor. Mohan found it difficult to adjust himself to this play of light and shadow. His imagination worked feverishly and he found a tiger, a leopard or a bear lurking in every shadow. But by the time he made out each shadow around the pool, the pattern changed shape with the movement of the moon, and Mohan would begin all over again. The clouds passing across the face of the moon strained Mohan's eyes and they began to water. Sensing this, his father signalled to him to rely on his ears too and not to overstrain his eyes.

Not long afterwards a herd or sounder of wild boar, led by a large sow, briskly made its way to the far side of the pool. After a quick drink, the sounder waded in and wallowed in the mud. After cooling themselves the boars got out and went rooting for insects, grubs, fallen fruits and tubers before slowly moving away. Being omnivorous they were not very choosy about what they ate. But

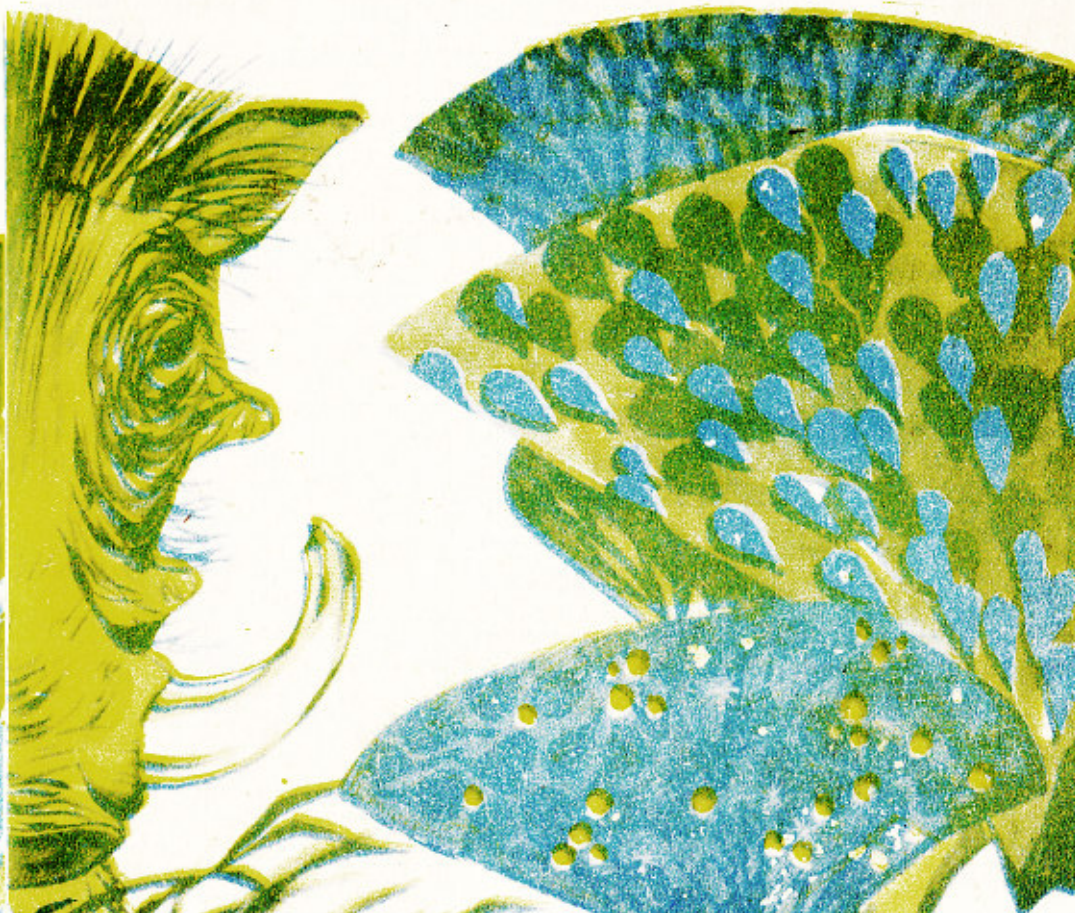
they were certainly clean feeders in comparison to their cousins, the domestic pigs.

A few minutes later, a large, fierce-looking boar armed with short but sharp tusks or 'tushes' and almost twice as big as the sow in the sounder, came from the opposite direction and drank. As it was drinking, a dead branch fell, causing a disturbance. The boar thinking it was under attack quickly turned. Holding its head high, its tusks glinting in the moonlight, its bristly hair standing on end, and grunting angrily, it faced the direction from which the noise



came. Looking at it Mohan told himself that even if he were a starving tiger he would prefer to keep away from a boar which showed such readiness to fight.

They had brought some food to eat which the Wildlife Warden had wrapped in a soft plastic sheet, to avoid the crackling noise that paper makes. In the stillness of the forest even the noise of paper would be magnified many times, disturbing the sharp-eared wild animals. After eating the food and drinking the coffee brought in



a flask, Mohan's father suggested that they should take turns in keeping watch. It was agreed that if something interesting turned up the person keeping watch should wake the other up.

IV

Mohan took the first watch. A pair of red-wattled lapwings flew in. But before landing they circled the pool at tree-top level. As they flew round one of them spotted the *machan* and its occupants. At once it warned the other. Together they flew round and round the mango tree calling madly, "Did-he-do-it", "did-he-do-it" to warn the forest folk of the presence of Mohan and the warden. Mohan was annoyed and wished that the birds would go away. Fortunately for them, the birds did this so often that no one took much notice of their warning.

Generally, it is easy to detect a herd of elephants on the move. Mohan was alerted of the approach of a herd long before he saw it. The elephants trumpeted often to keep in touch with each other. Mother elephants scolded their young ones as if asking them to behave. But the youngsters got out of sight of their mothers and squealed with delight as they played pranks with each other. They all fed noisily, tearing down branches of trees, pushing down the small ones to reach the top branches.

When they neared the pool they rushed to the water's edge and drank thirstily. Every now and then they would squirt water over themselves. Soon they were all wet and glistening in the moonlight, which made them seem bigger than they actually were. After drinking, some of the older elephants sprayed themselves with mud

that they had churned up with their feet. Others had dust baths by kicking up earth with their feet and throwing it over themselves. What is the use of having a bath at all, if they are going to get dirty so soon this way, thought Mohan. It was only the next morning that his father solved the mystery for him. He explained that elephants have dust and mud baths not only to keep cool but to remove the ticks and other insect parasites that attach themselves to their bodies.

The last to reach the pool was the herd bull, a magnificent tusker, with a long, even pair of tusks. It was huge and majestic and Mohan admired it greatly. There were some young bulls in the herd and they made a party of their own and indulged in rough play. With the departure of the elephants it seemed as if calm had descended after a storm.

As time advanced, towards midnight, fewer visitors came and when it was Mohan's turn to sleep he was not at all sorry to turn in. Mohan took his next watch in the early hours of the morning. As there was nothing to interest him, he soon fell asleep again.

A noisy commotion in the forest all around woke him up. The spotted deer's shrill cry and the sambur's honking 'bell', mixed with the langur's warning cough, showed that the animals were alarmed. Soon the peafowl also joined the chorus. A gentle breeze was stirring up. Mohan immediately sat up, equally excited. He was sure that these animals had smelt or seen a predator, possibly a tiger. By now his father had woken up too. Soon the breeze died down and with it the alarm calls faded away. The breeze had carried the predator's scent to its prey. They had not seen the killer.

There was absolute silence. Either the killer had gone away or it was stalking its prey unobserved. It was a silence born of fear and uncertainty. Mohan could feel the tension in the air. Suddenly

Then, at the break of dawn, he detected a slight movement on the game trail.

As he watched, a magnificent tiger came into view. It had a lovely striped coat and there was power in every stride it took. It made its way to the *machan* end of the pool where the water was clear and crouched on a rock and drank. It was joined by a smaller tiger. It seemed that it was a tigress. This was confirmed later by Mohan's father, who checked the pug marks. Shafts of light from the rising sun hit the two animals and made their bodies glow. It was an unforgettable sight. As Mohan watched intently, his father sketched their markings, especially their facial ones, for identification.

Mohan lifted the binoculars and focussed them on the tiger's head. It brought the tiger so close so suddenly, that he gasped in awe. The tiger turned and looked directly at the *machan* and into the lens, with curiosity and suspicion, but without fear. And thus Mohan met his tiger face to face.

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